



SHARP FACTS

Talking to Teens About Sexual Responsibility



Why should I talk to my teen about sexual responsibility?

Helping your children avoid teen pregnancy and infection with Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) including HIV, works best when they occur as part of strong, close relationships with your children that are built from an early age. Research supports these common sense lessons: not only are they good ideas generally, but they can also help teens delay becoming sexually active, as well as encourage those who are having sex to plan for safety.

How do I talk to my teen about sexual responsibility?

The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy offers these ideas for parents when discussing sexual responsibility with their children.

1. Be clear about your own sexual values and attitudes. Communicating with your children about sex, love, and relationships is often more successful when you are certain in your own mind about these issues. To help clarify your attitudes and values, think about the following kinds of questions:

- What do you really think about school-aged teenagers being sexually active-perhaps even becoming parents?
- Who is responsible for setting sexual limits in a relationship and how is that done, realistically?
- Were you sexually active as a teenager and how do you feel about that now?
- Were you sexually active before you were married? What do such reflections lead you to say to your own children about these issues?
- What do you think about encouraging teenagers to abstain from sex?
- What do you think about teenagers using contraception?

2. Talk with your children early and often about sex, and be specific. Kids have lots of questions about sex, and they often say that the source they'd most like to go to for answers is their parents. Start the conversation, and make sure that it is honest, open, and respectful. If you can't think of how to start the discussion, consider using situations shown on television or in movies as conversation starters. Tell them candidly and confidently what you think and why you take these positions; if you're not sure about some issues, tell them that, too. Be sure to have a two-way conversation, not a one-way lecture. Ask them what they think and what they know so you can correct misconceptions. Ask what, if anything, worries them.

Age-appropriate conversations about relationships and intimacy should begin early in a child's life and continue through adolescence. Resist the idea that there should be just one conversation about all this - you know, "the talk." The truth is that parents and kids should be talking about sex and love all along. This applies to both sons and daughters and to both mothers and fathers. All kids need a lot of communication, guidance, and information about these issues, even if they sometimes don't appear to be interested in what you have to say. And if you have regular conversations, you won't worry so much about making a mistake or saying something not quite right, because you'll always be able to talk again.

Many inexpensive books and videos are available to help with any detailed information you might need, but don't let your lack of technical information make you shy. Kids need as much help in understanding the meaning of sex as they do in understanding how all the body parts work. Tell them about love and sex, and what the difference is. And remember to talk about the reasons that kids find sex interesting and enticing; discussing only the "downside" of unplanned pregnancy and disease misses many of the issues on teenagers' minds.

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Here are the kinds of questions kids say they want to discuss:

- How do I know if I'm in love? Will sex bring me closer to my girlfriend/boyfriend?
- How will I know when I'm ready to have sex? Should I wait until marriage?
- Will having sex make me popular? Will it make me more grown-up and open up more adult activities to me?
- How do I tell my boyfriend that I don't want to have sex without losing him or hurting his feelings?
- How do I manage pressure from my girlfriend to have sex?
- How does contraception work? Are some methods better than others? Are they safe?
- Can you get pregnant the first time?

In addition to being an "askable parent," be a parent with a point of view. Tell your children what you think. Don't be reluctant to say, for example:

- I think kids in high school are too young to have sex, especially given today's risks.
- Whenever you do have sex, always use protection against pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases until you are ready to have a child.
- Our family's religion says that sex should be an expression of love within marriage.
- Finding yourself in a sexually charged situation is not unusual; you need to think about how you'll handle it in advance. Have a plan. Will you say "no"? Will you use contraception? How will you negotiate all this?
- It's okay to think about sex and to feel sexual desire. Everybody does! But it's not okay to get pregnant/get somebody pregnant as a teenager.
- One of the many reasons I'm concerned about teens drinking is that it often leads to unprotected sex.
- (For boys) Having a baby doesn't make you a man. Being able to wait and acting responsibly does.
- (For girls) You don't have to have sex to keep a boyfriend. If sex is the price of a close relationship, find someone else.

By the way, research clearly shows that talking with your children about sex does not encourage them to become sexually active. And remember, too, that your own behavior should match your words. The "do as I say, not as I do" approach is bound to lose with children and teenagers, who are careful and constant observers of the adults in their lives.

Preventing HIV Infection and Other STDs: Recommended Prevention Strategies

Abstaining from sexual intercourse is the most effective pregnancy and STD/HIV prevention strategy. For individuals who are sexually active, the following may reduce risk:

- Engaging in sexual activities that do not involve vaginal, anal, or oral intercourse
- Having intercourse only with one uninfected partner utilizing an appropriate contraceptive
- Using latex condoms correctly from start to finish with each act of intercourse

Where can I get more information?

For detailed information, counseling, and access to birth control options, contact your medical provider. A medical provider should be consulted if your child may have been exposed to any sexually transmitted disease or if they may be pregnant. CDC provides information through their National STD Hotline at (800) 227-8922. The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy offers information for parents and teens through their website at:

<http://www.teenpregnancy.org> For further information regarding your sexual health, visit the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program Home Page at <http://www-nehc.med.navy.mil/hp/sharp>.

This information was adapted by the Sexual Health and Responsibility Program (SHARP), Directorate of Health Promotion and Population Health, Navy Environmental Health Center in Norfolk Virginia from material developed by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy.